

ARTICLE APPLIED
ON PAGE K-3

WASHINGTON POST
31 March 1985

THE OUTLOOK INTERVIEW: *John Nichols Talks to Norbert Blei*

Being in Love With Words, And Uncomfortable With Money

Q: What were you doing when you wrote your first book, "The Sterile Cuckoo"?

A: I was living in New York City. I was still in college. After I got out of college I spent a year in Spain. I came back to this country, in June of 1963, and started taking [it] around to various publishers. I'd hand carry it, and leave it at the desk of the secretary. I'd pick publishers out of The New York Times Book Review and I'd put a postcard in the manuscript, and ask them to send me a postcard, and I would come and pick it up. Spent very little money. The subway cost only 15. I was living on \$800 a year and \$500 of it was rent. Those were the days. I was also trying to earn a living playing my guitar in the little cafes in Greenwich Village. Not doing very well there. Selling cartoons, pen-and-ink drawings. Mostly of naked ladies.

Q: So you were living the romantic life of the artist?

A: It wasn't real romantic because I was living in a very small apartment, and \$42 a month even then didn't get you a whole lot in New York. I lived real alone. I did not have a girlfriend. I did not go out, go drinking with the guys. I was working. I wrote incessantly. "The Sterile Cuckoo" was the fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh novel. I wrote my first novel when I was 16 and wrote a novel a year in college.

Q: How do you explain that obsession that you had, of writing that early? Mother, father, anybody?

A: There was a lot of writing [in my] family. Our great-grandfather on my mother's side, Anatole Le Braz, was a famous French writer in Brittany. But mostly, I was about 13 when I started writing gangster stories, after Damon Runyon. I remember the summer my dad got divorced. I lived with my father and he

was gone a lot at the time. He was working with the CIA in Washington. I stayed at home every day. I wrote a lot, trying to kill time.

I used to have a friend and we'd come to each other's houses, and our idea of spending an evening together was we'd each try to write a short story. We'd just sit there and try and write it, and then we'd give it to each other to read.

I did a lot of things. I was a big jock. I played three varsity sports every year. I acted in plays. I had a lot of energy.

* * * * *

EXCERPTED

Norbert Blei is a novelist who lives in Door County, Wis.